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The Future Isn't Now: Impossible Action in Political Scholarship

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ABSTRACT In a world of negation, it is exhilarating to imagine possibilities. Such is evident in the strain of critique that asserts there is something radically productive in opening up possibilities. This makes sense: critical theory seeks to illuminate something beyond endless torrents of death and destruction. But, this essay contends, the thrill of possibility-creation has created a new aporia: the affect *gesture* of possibility risks overshadowing the *realization* of radical possibilities. Various strains of scholarship presume that scholarly politics is a matter of perceiving and awakening possibilities. The impulse is most readily clear in utopianist scholarship like that of José Esteban Muñoz, but it's also evident in work by Saidiya Hartman, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and even Rita Felski. All these materials propose that cultural materials can coordinate possible worlds, and by extension, scholarship competency is to schematize them. But, I argue, the scholarship that follows these thinkers risks becoming trapped by possibility. It's captivating to imagine new ways of being or living or knowing, but there exists neither the professional incentive nor the affective discipline to realize those possibilities. In our reverie at imagining the construction of a better world, our blueprints don't necessarily reach the builder—and the indulgence of possibility risks sliding back into despair. This essay does not argue for dismissing the scholarship above, but rather suggests we haven't read them *well enough*. Muñoz, Hartman, and Sedgwick are not drunk on hope; their openness to possibility comes from the mute agony of living in an unlivable world. Although a variety of material factors stand in the way of scholar-activism, this affective trap remains one of the most pressing—for if we do not recognize the feelings that structure political scholarship, we will only be playing a language game, projecting possibilities that could never come to fruition.

KEYWORDS activism, affect, hope, possibility, utopia

In a dark world, it's exhilarating to dream of possibility. A certain vein of literary and cultural critique is founded on this principle, proposing that there is something politically productive in *imagining otherwise*. Such scholarship, which

stretches across a variety of different methodological positions, is readily recognized by its gestural rhetoric—its stakes are to inaugurate new paradigms, shed light on potential ways of being, envision other worlds. In one way, this ethos makes sense: radical politics *should* point the way to something better than death and destruction. But it seems that the thrill of possibility-creation has produced a new aporia for critique. The affect that undergirds possibility politics—the ecstasy of imagining otherwise—runs the risk of obscuring the obstacles between critique and action and thereby making critique more indulgent than generative, more projective than powerful, more self-soothing than edifying.

The politics of possibility descends from a critical-theoretical turn toward speculative thinking in the past two decades. José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), a seminal text in queer studies, is perhaps the most salient example of such thought: Muñoz posits on the first page that queerness is emblematic of "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[1] For him, queerness is a "warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" and studying queer aesthetics unveils "blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity" for human sociality.[2] But *Cruising Utopia* is not alone in its speculative disposition. A similar maneuver appears, albeit with different disciplinary coordinates, in Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts," which positions Hartman's method of critical fabulation as a means for "exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities)" to tell provisional histories of transatlantic slavery.[3] Though slavery's archive is inevitably fragmented, possibility lingers in the act of critical intervention: aporia births vitality, if only temporarily. Hartman's later *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) offers a less qualified version of this historical-poetical method: excavating "the nothing special and the extraordinary brutality" of fin-de-siècle Black life, she says, produces a "chorus" which "propels transformation . . . is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of otherwise."[4] While Hartman does not avow precisely the same utopianist

commitment as Muñoz, *possibility* is still a galvanic force of her work; critique's work seems to be its possibility-making.

Nor are appeals to possibility confined to what we loosely (and/or arbitrarily) call critique. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading," for instance, posits the titular reparative method not as an aesthetic practice for the well-lettered but as a way to "assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have the resources to offer an inchoate self."[5] What we "learn" from such objects, she argues, is the "many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture."[6] Tucked into Sedgwick's language is an appeal to criticism's possibility-making faculty: her reparative politics is about discerning what makes it possible for an individual or collective to survive in a hostile world. Even Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, the most stridently anti-critique entry in literary studies' so-called Method Wars, nestles an appeal to possibility within its political pragmatism. Though Felski dismisses critique's supposed utopianism, she asserts that her aim is to find a method, and thus a politics, open to "the differences, variations, contradictions, and possibilities in social conditions as we find them."[7] The problem, for Felski, is about how literary methodology conditions our ability to judge which resources for possible worlds are contained in which political environments—not so different from Muñoz or Hartman, in an odd sense.

I make this critical tour to highlight that possibility politics is not a narrow strain of thought. On the contrary, as Caroline Levine argues, critical attention to potentiality stretches across theoretical schools and methodologies (Levine herself cites Derek Attridge, Jonathan Kramnick, and Roderick Ferguson as noteworthy examples,[8] though we might also think of Ernst Bloch,[9] Theodor Adorno,[10] Herbert Marcuse,[11] or, for that matter, the lengthy Hegelian philosophical tradition from which they emerged—all of which is incredibly productive to consider but which there isn't space here to discuss).[12] This sort of scholarship asserts that cultural materials, whether in themselves or upon being

activated by scholarly engagement, contain some way of coordinating possibilities and envisioning new worlds. By extension, critical theory's competency is to make these possibilities explicit. In the ecosystem of revolutionary vocations, the scholar is imagined as a medley of prophet and strategist, herald of the possible and presager of action.

But the critique that's followed Sedgwick, Hartman, and Muñoz, I think, has become yoked to an affect that risks *entrapment* in the promise of possibility. Although it's easy to indulge in rapturous accounts of scholarship's worldmaking power, it's also easy to forget that there's no necessary connection between a hopeful affect and an ability to *enact* possibilities. As Patricia Stuelke has remarked, "To imagine that things are broken and can be fixed with the best of intentions, with a labor of love, with a new way of reading . . . is a category error that neither the planet nor any of its inhabitants can afford."[13] Although we can revel in imagining the construction of a better world, there's no guarantee our blueprints reach the builder—and, even worse, the binge of hope can lead back into despair.

To be clear, I am not taking issue with the speculative scholars I've considered so far—their work is illuminating, and in fact, it's precisely my belief that we haven't read them *well enough*. Instead, our readings have led to a kind of ersatz utopianism that can occlude the real demands of activist commitment. Although a variety of material factors stand in the way of scholar-activism, from institutional complicity to prohibitive constraints on time,[14] the affect of possibility scholarship risks painting over these difficulties. The stakes are high: if we do not recognize the feelings that structure our scholarly political commitments, scholarly activism will be nothing more than a language game.

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It begins when I (you, we) inhabit the world. The world feels terrible. For reasons related to content oversaturation, to my own uncertainty in what I do, to my own struggle to commit to doing the work of making the world better, and to the multiple cultural phenomena grouped under the rubric of "crisis," things feel bad.

Then, I open a book. A special book. I read a pithy, punchy, compelling voice: English departments and/or the humanities and/or higher education and/or liberal democracy and/or global ecology is/are in a state of crisis, the kind of crisis that seems as crushing to read about as it is to experience (a vulgar abstraction, but a common one for many in the academy). Then, somewhere in the book, perhaps in its introduction or methodological outline, maybe in the theoretical intervention or maybe in the rhetorical flourish that hints at its final chapter, there's something else. Literary studies itself, I learn, represents hope. I realize, carried along by the beaming light of incandescent language, that reading can sculpt the flames of possibility. Suddenly, it seems thrillingly simple to touch another world. I learn that I can build with literature, that the past contains tools to reconstruct the future, that I belong to a class of heroes prophesying visions to construct a new world. I just need do what I'm already good at doing: write about books.

I tell my colleagues about the text, mention it in conference panels, drop references in essays, content myself with knowing that I am on the frontlines of something new. Possibilities seize me: perhaps I will use Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) for mutual aid communications or Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941) to organize a community collective or Morowa Yejidé's *Creatures of Passage* (2021) for creating collective historical records.

But I don't.

I might fire off an email or donate money to a bail fund or germinate an idea for a discussion group, but eventually, the ecstasy fades into the murmur of everyday life. I return to research and teaching, and the grand possibilities I excavated from my literature of choice fade away. I tell myself it's okay (*the real work I do is the care work of teaching, anyway*). I open my phone. I'm slapped in the face with content overload, crisis porn. Things feel bad. It begins again.

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In part, this is a story about one person (me) with their own foibles (mine). Simultaneously, however, this is also not about just one person. This is about the kinds of feelings that thread across our intellectual engagement, the affects that shape how we read and speak and think about acting. My intent here is not to engage in what David Kurnick has thoughtfully called a "moralized characterology," a rhetorical maneuver implying that the crisis in the humanities has something to do with particular kinds of psyches.[15] To be clear: whether or not the humanities wither under institutional austerity will have little to do with the affect of our possibility politics. Yet though our psyches won't determine critique's institutional fate, *whether* and *how* we're able to put our gestures into action has entirely to do with our affective disposition, with our ability to convert everyday feelings into political commitments.

And so this is not just a story about me. I suspect that you, too, have read a work that's made you hope, that's given you the thrill of possibility, and that has dropped you back into hopelessness. I suspect that you've read a paper or heard a conference presentation that contends with unspeakable violence—white supremacy, homophobia, imperialism—and, blithely invoking possibility

scholarship (often that of Muñoz or Hartman), paves over the difference between gesture and action.

This mode of scholarship, I contend, risks producing the kind of the affect that Lauren Berlant terms cruel optimism: "When something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[16] For Berlant, this kind of relation is constituted by "attachments that organize the present," rather than ones that responsibly relate to the future.[17] The connection might seem odd, given that possibility politics professes to be about futurity—but despite its notional commitment to the future, the affect of possibility politics is inevitably bound up with how one feels *now*. Inevitably, any critical maneuver will draw from and produce specific affects in those who make and read them; in the case of possibility politics, it isn't just about the future we imagine but our disposition to the present, the way that dreams of possible worlds can soothe the psychic pain of contemporary political violence. But—and this part is crucial—despite its power to energize the writer and reader, to soothe the psychic pain of living in an ailing world, scholarly possibilities have no necessary relation to future-oriented action. Gestures toward possibility do not, for instance, fix the fact that, as sociologist Francesca Cancian has highlighted, to be a professional academic and committed activist are each so demanding as to preclude one another.[18]

Now, we might tell ourselves, it's hardly fair to think of theory in the same way we think about concrete action like community agriculture, wealth redistribution, or eviction disruption. Theory, we know so well and are so happy to explain, belongs in a dialectic with action; theory's purpose is to offer provocations rather than engage in concrete solution-making, and it demands non-instrumentalized thinking to do so.[19] But we shouldn't forget that dialectic demands *moving between* theory and action, not simply flinging possibilities into a void and hoping something will happen. As Nicholas Whittaker has incisively argued of "undercommons" scholarship: "it might seem as though all the undercommons has to offer us are declarations: screeds and manifestos and reading groups and

open-access journals. If David's stone cannot fell Goliath, what good are his words?"[20] Ultimately, if critique only produces hypothetical possibility and inebriated hope, then it isn't praxis—it's escapism.

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Earlier in this essay, I quoted the first page of *Cruising Utopia*, in which Muñoz asserts that queerness represents "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." But, like many who bandy about Muñoz's words, I did not quote the book's very first line: "Queerness is not yet here."[21]

The line is startling. Compared to the gossamer language of possibility-making, it seems cold and blunt. He continues: "The here and now is a prison house . . . Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that the world is not enough, that indeed something is missing."[22] There's a sober recognition that the root of utopian possibility is existential negation. Agony underpins the moment of queer worldmaking; the glimmering light of another world is only visible amidst a morass of death. Though utopianism helps one survive, it's not an opiate—it's a response to the absurd pain of living in a world that doesn't want you. In part, this complexity can be traced to *Cruising Utopia*'s historicity. As Muñoz himself clarifies, his argument is an intervention on queer theory's 90s-to-2000s tug-of-war between antisociality and neoliberal concessionism, between Lee Edelman's "fuck the social order . . . fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*," et al.[23] and *we're just like you*.[24] His affective posture belongs to a complex discursive field that is defined as much by the political prospects of 2009 as by *Cruising Utopia*'s internal logic; there's a way, in other words, that Muñoz's thought meant something different then than it does now.

The same is true of Hartman: despite the lackadaisical ease with which many scholars invoke her, her critical possibility-making emerges not in glib rhetorical flourish but in a specific historical-critical venture. In her careful sketch of critical fabulation in "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman recognizes that to do so is to "tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling"[25]—and indeed, she does so *specifically* as a counterpoint to her own critical fabulation in *Lose Your Mother* (2007).[26] Possibility folds back into impossibility; hope for the possible is born only out of the impossible, irredeemable, absolute unlivability of slavery and its afterlives. Such is evident in her first book, *Scenes of Subjection*, which concerns itself with action and possibility—not offering a roadmap for the reader, but attempting to account for slave subjects themselves. Although the book devotes considerable attention to action itself, Hartman emphasizes that the "utopian expressions of freedom" to be found in the archive of American slavery "are not and perhaps cannot be actualized elsewhere."[27] Certainly, "these small acts of resistance" can "offer some small measure of encouragement" amidst the present's "seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the quixotic search for a subject capable of world-historical action, and the despair induced by the lack of one."[28] But this is a consolation, not a pathway to action per se.

Indeed, Hartman is wary even of consolation, as an affect of scholarly rhetoric. At the heart of "Venus in Two Acts" is Hartman's confession that, enthralling as it is to imagine "the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility" amidst the abject terror of the Middle Passage,[29] doing so would have been grossly inappropriate: "I wanted to console myself and to escape the slave hold with a vision of something other than the bodies of two girls settling on the floor of the Atlantic."[30] The possibility-awakening maneuvers of *Lose Your Mother* and later *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* emerge, then, not as a single monological thesis about hope, but as tenuous approaches to a problem ricocheting through her work, which she articulates in the seminal "The Position of the Unthought:" "narrat[ing] a certain impossibility, to illuminate those practices that speak to the limits of most available narratives to explain the position of the enslaved."[31] Not salvation,

at least not immediately, but *explanation*. And so from the vantage of 2007–8, critical fabulation emerged as one imperfect experiment in a long endeavor to narrate slavery's afterlife—bold, certainly, but certainly not vouchsafed in its attempt to "pr[y] open the dead book."[32]

In 2024, speaking to a broad cohort of scholars who are at least notionally committed to constructive politics,[33] it's easy to read Muñoz or Hartman and to use rhetoric like theirs and feel encouraged by our own audacity to fundamentally rethink the structure of reality. But the context that made their work bold and explosive has changed; when their positions are firmly mainstream, declaring the power of possibility isn't so bold as it seems.

In Muñoz's and Hartman's work, there is a clear admission of theodicy. Neither queer utopianism nor critical fabulation are masturbatory bacchanals of possibility; they are the often whimsical and sometimes funny but always *serious* work of navigating in a world where Death rules. Such sobriety is often lost in the possibility politics that follows from and casually invokes them. It is not that such scholarship is happy-go-lucky; on the contrary, it often inhabits the grim realities of ecocide, white supremacy, and imperial violence. But the difference that makes a difference is the engagement with disciplined action, or a lack thereof. This sort of scholarship entwines scholarship with acts of resistance—*things might seem horrible, but the act of care/imagining-otherwise/resistance that is writing itself will save us!*—but doing so, to me, seems conveniently nonspecific when it comes to political action. It runs the risk of making suffering an affective backdrop, easily redeemed by the promise we can build a different world merely by doing what we're already doing. The reader can be engulfed in vaporous hope, a sense that they *can* make the world better, that in fact the world *will* get better, just by *reading this book*. Possibility politics doesn't necessarily push readers toward action so much as help them to get out of bed each morning.

It's hard to sneer at this. Who among us (and by *us* I mean the quite narrow category of person holding or with a path to holding an advanced degree) doesn't need to be helped out of bed? But simultaneously, that's just what it takes to be an ethical actor in a difficult world, not an end in itself. This is why the danger of possibility is precisely its empowering claim, its ability to let us feel that we're doing the work when the most we're doing (in that moment, anyway) is reading or writing. I don't mean this as indulgent self-flagellation or crocodile tears about ivory tower intellectualism. It's merely a statement of fact: *more gestures to possibility do not necessarily lead to more action*.

If we wish to engage in an authentically constructive politics, doing so will require discipline.[34] We must not just imagine otherwise but *do* otherwise—discern how to enact the possibilities toward which we gesture, or, on the other hand, attend to their impossibility amidst this suffering world. This is why, as Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò has argued, constructivist politics is not just invigorating but "demanding":

> It asks us to be planners and designers, to be accountable and responsive to people who aren't yet in the room. In addition to being architects, it asks us to become builders and construction workers: to actually build the kinds of rooms we could sit in together, rather than idly speculate about which rooms would be nice. But . . . the constructive approach has implicit moral and emotional demands, as well: we can neither plan nor build a better world without collectively cultivating diverse kinds of moral and emotional discipline.[35]

We must dream, and envision, and imagine, and bring our emotional powers to bear on presaging a new world. And then we must *actually do it*. We must cultivate affective attachments that do not indulge in empty dreams of possibility or use theory as an alibi for complacency. This does not mean we should atomize all political activity—to be sure, we must develop social habits that emphasize genuine political commitments over social capital, create professional structures that help make it easy to translate our work to activism, and so much more. But none of those collective efforts can succeed without individual discipline. This

might strike the reader as monastic or militaristic, but discipline is not the sole domain of monks or soldiers. Discipline is the precondition for a radical ethic; discipline entails recognizing that it's *hard* to do the right thing in an unjust world—that forgoing easy consolation in favor of concrete action *must* be at least a little taxing. Discipline means self-knowledge and self-control. It requires us to recognize the difference between gesture and reality, to avoid the trap of self-indulgence, and, above all, to do what we say we're going to do.

If we insist on making scholarship a venue for activism, then we must do so with the genuine rigor of any other activist venture. This means knowing the difference between the drunkenness of hope and the discipline of action. It means not just cheering ourselves up or helping ourselves believe that our local action would mean something if only we got around to it. No: it means being honest in committing to action—and sometimes, it means being honest about when action is impossible.

Notes

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1. ↩
2. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1. ↩
3. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 13. ↩
4. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 167. ↩
5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 150–151. ↩
6. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 151. ↩
7. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 145. ↩
8. Caroline Levine, "In Praise of Happy Endings: Precarity, Sustainability, and the Novel," *Novel* 55, no. 3 (November 1, 2022): 389. ↩

9. See Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Fred Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987). ↩

10. For a productive analysis of possibility's appearance in Adorno's writing, see Iain Macdonald, *What Would Be Different: Figures of Possibility in Adorno*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. ↩

11. See Herbert Marcuse, "Remarks on a Redefinition of Culture," *Daedalus* 94, no. 1 (1965): 190–207. ↩

12. For a useful exploration of Hegel's theory of possibility, see Nahum Brown, *Hegel on Possibility: Dialectics, Contradiction, and Modality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). ↩

13. Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 218. While I'm of a mixed mind on Stuelke's historical claims, and while I believe she fails to distinguish particularly sophisticated accounts of reparativity like Muñoz's, I believe she's entirely correct to distinguish the insidious feel-good character of the reparative affect—that "sometimes what feels like a relief, like hope, like change, like utopian possibility, actually signals a shifting orientation to existing violent infrastructures" (217). ↩

14. See David Croteau, "Which Side Are You On?" in *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics, and Social Movement Scholarship*, ed. David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Charlotte Ryan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). ↩

15. David Kurnick, "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas," *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020): 369. ↩

16. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1. ↩

17. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 14. ↩

18. Francesca M. Cancian, "Conflicts between Activist Research and Academic Success: Participatory Research and Alternative Strategies," *American Sociologist* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 1993): 103. ↩

19. See Caroline Levine, "The Long Lure of Anti-Instrumentality: Politics, Aesthetics, and Sustainability," *Modern Fiction Studies* 67, no. 2 (2021): 225–46. ↩

20. Nicholas Whittaker, "Review: Elite Capture," *The Point*, October 18, 2022, https://thepointmag.com/politics/elite-capture/ < https://thepointmag.com/politics/elite-capture/> . ↩

21. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1. ↩

22. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1. ↩

23. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 29. ↩

24. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 18. ↩

25. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11. ↩

26. See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 136–54. ↩

27. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13. ↩

28. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 14. ↩

29. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 8. ↩

30. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,”9. ↩

31. Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 184. ↩

32. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” 12. ↩

33. Whether this is genuine or because they have learned the argot of radical action and “structural change” as a matter of performance, is another question. ↩

34. It’s an open question, of course, whether possibility and action should be rightly imagined as co-determinants for constructive politics to begin with. Although there’s a strong critical heritage predicated on activating latent possibilities within the present, certain thinkers question the very notion that political action emerges from possibility per se. Jared Sexton, for example, has questioned the notions “that imagination requires possibility in order to flourish (does it not flourish precisely in the face of impossibility?) and that agency suffers from inescapable constraint (is constraint not rather a precondition of agency?)” (“Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” 57n1). Elsewhere, Sexton draws attention to the critical value of perceiving “activity” as distributed throughout both action and non-action: “even passivity (whether waiting or resting or languishing) is a type of activity, that of our active being, that which brings forth life from the non-life with which it is commingled. Our being is active, but that doesn’t mean our being is always in-action” (“On Black Negativity, Or The Affirmation Of Nothing”). ↩

35. Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)* (London: Pluto Press, 2022), 118. ↩

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